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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001575

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PTER PREL AG IZ

SUBJECT: ALGERIANS OUTRAGED BY MURDER OF TWO DIPLOMATS IN BAGHDAD, IMPLICATIONS FOR THEIR IRAQ POLICY UNCLEAR

REF: A. ALGIERS 1539

1B. ALGIERS 1560

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Marc Sievers, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

11. (C) Summary and Comment. Algerians reacted with shock and outrage to the announcement July 27 by Al-Qaida in Iraq that it had executed the two kidnapped Algerian diplomats, Ali Belaroussi and Azzedine Belkadi. Within two hours of the posting of the Al-Qaida announcement on a jihadist website, the Presidency confirmed that they were dead, reportedly based on information obtained by a GOA working group in Amman. President Bouteflika issued a strongly worded statement condemning the murders, which he termed "odious" and "cowardly," expressed condolences to the families, and warned that Algeria would "pursue with cold determination" those who perpetrated the kidnapping and murder of the two men. Foreign Minister Bedjaoui convened the MFA staff to express his personal outrage and grief. In comments to the press afterward, Bedjaoui admitted for the first time that the GOA had sought to contact the kidnappers but without success. Public opinion is clearly angry, with much of the fury now directed at the terrorists and their Algerian sympathizers, especially former FIS number two Ali Benhadj, who was arrested in Algiers after making a statement to Al-Jazeera that appeared to call for killing the two diplomats since they were "agents of the occupation." At the same time, some anger is also directed at the Iraqi government for allegedly failing to protect the diplomats, at the U.S. for invading Iraq in the first place, and at the Algerian Government for not mobilizing public opinion and Islamic organizations in its efforts to seek their release. While it is not yet clear how this event will affect the GOA's cautiously supportive position toward the Iraqi Transitional Government, our sense is that statements such as Belhadj's and the calls by the Algerian terrorist group GSPC for the two diplomats to be executed, will underscore the links between Algerian terrorist groups and Zarqawi, and could help undermine Algerian popular sympathy for the Iraqi "resistance." Meanwhile, high-level expressions of sympathy and support should help Bouteflika fend off pressures to close the embassy and scale back contact with the Iraqi Transitional government. End Summary and Comment.

Al-Qaida Announces and GOA Confirms

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12. (C) Algerians reacted with outrage to reports mid-afternoon on July 27 that Zarqawi's Al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers had announced on a jihadist website that it had executed the two Algerian diplomats who were kidnapped in Baghdad July 21. Within two hours of the appearance of the announcement, the Presidency issued a statement confirming that the two men were dead. A well-informed source told us the confirmation was based on specific information obtained by the MFA working group in Amman. Whatever the basis, the confirmation was done in an authoritative manner that left no room to question the GOA's certainty. President Bouteflika condemned the killings as "cowardly," offered his personal condolences to the families, declared that these crimes had no justification and had nothing to do with the Islamic religion, and warned that after a suitable period of mourning, Algeria would pursue the killers with "cold determination." A minute of silence at noon July 28 was widely observed in Algiers and other major cities.

13. (U) Foreign Minister Mohammed Bedjaoui, flanked by Minister Delegate Messahel and Secretary General Lamamra, addressed the MFA staff at about the same time that the Presidency made its announcement. Appearing at a press conference at the MFA, Bedjaoui said Algeria was "stunned," and "could not understand the motivations of this vile crime." Bedjaoui admitted for the first time that the GOA had made two attempts to contact the kidnappers, but without receiving any response and without the kidnappers offering any demands. Bedjaoui said he hoped Algeria would be able to regain the corpses, but added that he was doubtful. Bedjaoui insisted the GOA had not made a mistake in deciding to send its diplomats to Iraq in 2003. He deflected a question whether Algeria held the Iraqi authorities responsible for not providing better security for diplomats in Baghdad, and said that after the mourning period, the GOA would "take the steps it sees as appropriate." Bedjaoui also condemned the statements issued by the GSPC terrorist group for contributing to the kidnappers' decision to kill their

prisoners.

Benhadj Arrested; Backlash against Islamists

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¶14. (U) Press commentary has paralleled Bedjaoui's outrage at the statement issued by GSPC July 26, in which the largest Algerian terrorist group expressed its solidarity with Zarqawi's organization and its joy at the kidnappings, called both diplomats "apostates," and accused Belkadi of having been an officer in Algerian intelligence service allegedly "responsible" for two massacres of Algerian civilians in 1990s, and called for them to be killed. The French language daily El Watan published a front page photo July 28 of Belaroussi taken while he performed the pilgrimage to Mecca in refutation of GSPC and Al-Qaida's claims that the men were "apostates" or converts.

¶15. (U) Former number two leader of the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) Ali Benhadj, who was released from house arrest by the GOA in 2003 on condition that he refrain from making political statements, was arrested at about the same time as the announcement of the deaths of the diplomats July 27. Benhadj had earlier granted an interview to Al-Jazeera in which he praised Al-Zarqawi's group, and appeared to justify killing the two diplomats on the grounds that they were "agents of the occupation." Benhadj also referred to the "corrupt and rotten" Algerian regime, which he contrasted with the Algerian people's alleged identification with the Iraqi "resistance." Benhadj expressed his support for "the brothers in the land of Jihad," saying that he prayed to God to make them victorious against the occupiers. Benhadj was reportedly being held for questioning at the Algiers central police station.

Angry Public, Uncertain Impact

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¶16. (C) The Algerian public as well as the GOA are angry over the killing of these two men, but the impact on Algerian policy toward Iraq remains unclear. Since the kidnappings July 21, most GOA spokesmen have emphasized that Algeria opposed the invasion of Iraq and always supported the restoration of Iraq's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity. The two diplomats were described in public statements as "administrative staff" sent to provide assistance to the 300-odd Algerian residents in Iraq, whose presence did not signal any particular support for the Iraqi Government. The GOA's public statements ignored Algeria's record of quiet cooperation with the three Iraqi governing bodies established since the war, its acceptance of the credentials of an Iraqi Ambassador to Algiers in 2004, and its support in the UNSC for the transfer of sovereignty and legitimization of MNF-I. Seeking to avoid stirring up a public opinion strongly opposed to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the GOA's failure to explain the true nature of its policy has put it in an awkward position and opened itself up to criticism that it sent Algerian diplomats into harm's way in Baghdad only to appease the Americans and British. Although we are encouraged by the assurances offered to Charge and UK Ambassador by Minister Delegate Messahel (ref b), made one day before the announcement of the killing of the two diplomats, that the Algerian Embassy in Baghdad would remain open, we anticipate that the GOA will be under considerable pressure from the public and even its own MFA staff to close it. Sympathy and encouragement from us and other coalition members, as well as from the Iraqi Transitional Government, are needed to help President Bouteflika hold the line.

¶17. (C) Even if the GOA's failure to level with its own public about its own reasons for cautiously supporting the Iraqi government is now exposing it to criticism, by far the largest part of the public's anger appears directed at the terrorists. By its gleeful statements of support for Zarqawi and his organization's criminal acts, GSPC has helped clarify for any Algerians who had doubts, the true nature of its relationship to the terrorists in Iraq. By accusing two average Algerian diplomats, one of whom was clearly a pious Muslim, of being "apostates" who deserved to die, GSPC has underscored that it remains at war with all elements of the Algerian state, not just the security services. By offering his own voice in support of murdering two helpless prisoners, in contradiction to all traditional Islamic values and traditions, Ali Benhadj has succeeded in reminding the Algerian public of what might have been their fate had the FIS come to power through the ballot box.

¶18. (C) Several Algerian contacts, all of them admittedly secular in outlook, have already commented to us that this incident has raised new doubts in their minds about President Bouteflika's plans for general amnesty. The vicious rhetoric of the kidnappers and that of their Algerian admirers, with their gross distortions of Islamic values, have served to underscore the deep fault-lines in Algerian society. By stirring up memories of the traumas experienced by every

Algerian household in the 1990s, the kidnapping and killing of the two diplomats is likely to have serious repercussions for Bouteflika's national reconciliation program, as well as for his Iraq policy.

SIEVERS